

O 081710Z SEP 03
FM AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5049
INFO ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
WHITE HOUSE NSC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L JERUSALEM 002819

NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE, NSC FOR ABRAMS/DANIN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/08/2013
TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [KWBG](#) [PGOV](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: THE TALE OF PM ABBAS'S RESIGNATION

REF: A. JERUSALEM 2771
[1](#)B. JERUSALEM 2772

Classified By: Acting Principal Officer Jeffrey Feltman, Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, disappointed and embittered after losing a power struggle with Arafat that left him publicly branded as a traitor, sent his letter of resignation to the PA President on September 6, then vented his frustrations to the Legislative Council in a closed session the same day. Abbas criticized Arafat for impeding his ability to govern, Israel for continuing its policy of targeted killings, and the U.S. for failing to press Israel to implement its roadmap commitments. Upon receiving Abbas's resignation letter, Arafat discussed his PM's fate among the Fatah, PLO and PLC leadership, and -- with most in favor of Abbas's departure -- scribbled on the letter, "Accepted, with God's blessing." On September 7, Arafat, after further consultations with the Fatah leadership, announced his decision to tap PLC Speaker, Ahmed Qure'i (Abu Ala'a), to form a new government. Assuming Qure'i accepts the appointment, he will have five weeks to form a government. Even as the next phase of political machinations began, several Fatah and PLC members in this weekend's drama looked back with wonder and not a little remorse. End summary.

The PM Says Goodbye

[1](#)2. (C) According to several ConGen sources in Ramallah, Abbas had already sent his resignation letter -- via Cabinet Affairs Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo and Cabinet Secretary (and FCC member) Hakim Balawi -- to the Muqatta'a hours before he addressed the PLC in closed session at noon on September 6. (Abed-Rabbo told A/PO that he had expected Arafat to refuse to accept the letter except from Abbas himself. To Abed-Rabbo's surprise, Arafat appeared "eager," nearly grabbing the letter from Abed-Rabbo's hands.) The PM was reportedly deeply disturbed by Fatah-organized demonstrations against him in Ramallah and Gaza the previous week (ref A), and graffiti on buildings in both cities branding him and his Security Affairs Minister Mohammed Dahlan collaborators with Israel and the U.S. One story has it that he was particularly upset after hearing that his grandson's classmates taunted him by shouting that his grandfather was a traitor. To avoid the crowd that was assembling outside the PLC building, Abbas entered through the rear door and, without revealing that he had already submitted his resignation, proceeded to enumerate his grievances.

[1](#)3. (C) Israel and the U.S., Abbas lamented, had "misled" him with their professions of support for his government and the roadmap. Most seriously, Israel, by killing several Hamas and PIJ activists in Nablus and Hebron in early August, had effectively torpedoed the hudna, ignited a new cycle of violence, and halted or revoked implementation of Israel's other roadmap commitments. He faulted the U.S. for not taking action to restrain Israel.

[1](#)4. (C) But Abbas directed most of his ire at Arafat. Arafat, he told the legislators, had interfered with his power of appointment as guaranteed in the amended Basic Law,

describing incidents in which Arafat improperly re-instated the head of the dismissed Personnel Bureau head in Gaza and revoked the appointment of Abdel Fattah Hemayel as Minister of Sports and Youth. Similarly, Abbas complained about Arafat's interference in Abbas's decision to designate his Foreign Minister, Nabeel Sha'ath, as the PA's delegate at Arab League and UN meetings. Abbas said he had obtained Arafat's acquiescence, but then the Chairman reversed his position, embarrassing the PM and throwing PA diplomatic representation into confusion.

15. (C) Finally, with regard to the central issue of consolidating the security forces under the Prime Minister, Abbas argued that he had not been trying to challenge Arafat's constitutional role as supreme commander of the armed forces, but rather to bring the PA into compliance with the roadmap. Nevertheless, he said, Arafat fought the move, even though it was clearly against an agreed PLO/PA policy to implement the roadmap fully. Abbas ended his speech by observing that his political position had deteriorated so badly, he had been labeled a "Karzai" by the public. PLC Speaker Abu Ala'a then announced that Abbas had submitted his resignation earlier in the morning.

Arafat Says OK

16. (C) Following the PLC session, Arafat convened the Fatah Central Council (FCC) to discuss how to react to Abbas's resignation. In the FCC, Nabeel Sha'ath and Tayib Abdel Rahim reportedly argued against accepting Abbas's resignation or, alternatively, accepting it and then re-appointing him. But they were in the minority, and the FCC eventually agreed by consensus that Abbas should go. This view was reinforced by reports that Abbas had informed the press that his decision was final. Arafat then reportedly made the decision to accept Abbas's resignation, writing on the PM's letter, "Accepted, with God's grace."

17. (C) That evening, Arafat next summoned PLO leaders and about 50 PLC members to the Muqatta'a to discuss the matter further, even though he had already reached his decision. Some argued for giving Abbas another chance -- PLC member Mohammed Hourani, in particular, argued that Abbas had been treated unfairly and complained that he had been compared to "Karzai." "Don't ever utter Abbas's name and Karzai's in the same sentence again," warned Arafat, as he announced his decision to the group and declared the matter at an end. (Abu Mazen later mused to A/PO that he didn't understand the complaints -- "would they rather have the warlords or Taliban leading Afghanistan? It should be a compliment to be called 'Karzai'!")

Abu Ala'a Is Tapped

18. (C) The next day, September 7, Arafat turned his attention to choosing Abbas's successor. Once again, he convened the FCC, whose members (including four who reside abroad who participated by phone) unanimously supported their FCC colleague, Abu Ala'a. The FCC members also reportedly discussed a security strategy to satisfy U.S. demands that the PA unify its security services under the PM and take action on the ground.

The Weekend's Players Look Back with Remorse

19. (C) A tone of remorse prevailed as several Fatah and PLC members today looked back over the weekend's events in conversations with Poloff. A tired Mufid abd Rabbo, a Tulkarm PLC and Fatah Higher Committee member, stayed in Ramallah all weekend for what he described as a "series of meetings filled with tension, anger, and blood-loss." Still, he argued, "you can't steal authorities (from Arafat) in our government, and that is what Abu Mazen was trying to do." Amin Maqbul, acting head of the Fatah Higher Committee, struck a defensive note in recounting the weekend's events to

Poloff. "We met over and over again and didn't reach an understanding (with Abu Mazen)," he said. But, he insisted, "we didn't push him to leave." Jamal ash-Shobaki, now Minister of Local Government in a caretaker cabinet, was inconsolable. "Abu Mazen sincerely wanted to reform this government," he lamented. "He had some successes, but outside problems kept strengthening the people who were being hurt by the changes. So they had an excuse to start calling him a traitor. Israel caused the collapse of Abu Mazen by never complying with the roadmap." Nablus PLC member Dalal Salameh summed up the weekend without Shobaki's rancor (probably because she is not in danger of losing a ministership) but with possibly greater poignancy. Her comment was an epitaph: "You lost a moderate current in Palestine," she said, "and we lost an important leader."

Comment

10. (C) The alacrity with which Abbas resigned and Arafat accepted his resignation and tapped PLC Speaker Abu Ala'a for the job surprised many observers here, but Arafat and the 14 members of Fatah's Central Committee were unlikely among them (ref B). Irked by Abbas's penchant for acting alone and failing to consult traditional Palestinian leadership bodies (i.e., foremost among them the FCC, of course), Arafat and a determined group within the FCC, reportedly led by Hani al-Hassan and Abbas Zaki, have worked steadily, mostly behind the scenes, to undermine Abbas since the day he returned from the summits at Aqaba and Sharm al-Sheikh last June. Abbas's efforts to wrest control of the security forces after the August 19 bus bombing went a step too far for Arafat. The questions now are whether and to what extent Arafat and the FCC will back Abbas's successor. These issues are now under negotiation, as Abu Ala'a works out his terms with the PA President for accepting the appointment.

FELTMAN